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SUBJECT: SPECIAL MEDIA REACTION: BUSH'S VISIT TO THE UAE

¶1. SUMMARY: Press coverage of President Bush's visit has been widespread and generally favorable. Key points including Iran, the democracy agenda and Israeli-Palestinian affairs were prominently reported in headlines and there have been positive and optimistic assessments of the likely impact on U.S.-UAE economic relations, a very important local concern following the Dubai Ports World controversy. Critics derided the impact on traffic and observed that the President's visit serves American interests and the concerns of local leadership, but does not truly further the causes, interests or issues that are salient to ordinary Arabs. END SUMMARY

¶2. The President's visit occupied the headlines and front pages of all six major papers (Al-Ittihad, Al-Bayan, Al-Khaleej, Gulf News, Gulf Today and Khaleej Times), and has been prominently covered by local television. The papers published full page or two-page spreads of photos of the President's activities on both days, including both formal meetings with leadership and cultural activities. Photographs of the President and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan discussing falconry during dinner on January 13 are extremely popular.

¶3. The impact on traffic, however, has turned up as a flashpoint for criticism. Khaleej Times and Gulf News ran photos of the empty Sheikh Zayed Road through Dubai, with articles registering strong complaints about the paralyzing effect of the President's visit on traffic, and arguing that the one-day work stoppage cost Dubai's economy an estimated 463 million dirham (about \$125 million). Dubai-based English daily "Gulf News" (circ. 100,000) devoted three inside pages and half of the front page to the traffic jams and road blocks in the congested city of Dubai.

¶4. Editorial reaction has likewise been mixed. Under the headline "unwanted President" Dr. Abdulkhaleq Abdullah wrote in Sharjah-based Arabic daily "Al-Khaleej" (circulation: 90.000):

"Wherever George Bush goes he is confronted with angry masses and demonstrations that condemn his policies, denounce his intransigence and oppose his visits. Bush, who lives his latest days in the White House, is fortunate that the UAE is hospitable and peaceful, and that its people are tolerant, generous and express their discontent silently with minimal media fuss. The visit of the only superpower to the UAE was peaceful and smooth and was received by the government with hospitality and courtesy; the majority of the people, however, were indifferent to the visit and did not care to

see Bush on the good land of the UAE.

"All over the world, governments have certain needs and they deal with facts on the ground in accordance to their interests; the people have their own interests.... Regardless of how strong U.S.-UAE relations are, Bush's visit remains a source of concern to the people of the UAE and the rest of the world because of Bush's intransigence, intentions and intervention in world affairs. The U.S. president is hated all over the world, his popularity has declined to unprecedented levels, the American people are [looking forward] to seeing him out of the White House and there are attempts by Congress to withdraw their confidence [sic] given [his] continuous violations of the U.S. Constitution and political and military defeats in Iraq.

"The U.S. will remain of interest to the UAE and the rest of the small GCC nations. It is an insurance company providing services to a small state that lives in a dangerous region and that has large neighbors with expansive and hidden intentions, and expansionist and extortionist desires. Therefore, the U.S. is an insurance company that provides services, not necessarily an ally or a friend. The supreme national interests of the UAE dictate maintaining the relations with the U.S. in order to get these services. Bush's visit to the UAE underlines the importance of the UAE: the third largest oil reserves in the world; the fourth largest reserves of gas; and a hub for business and trade hub for a region that reaches from Mauritania in the west and India in the east, to Central Asia in the north and South Africa in the south. If Bush has come here merely to seek more political privileges or to push for the conclusion of a failed free trade agreement, then he is unwelcome."

15. Editorial in Dubai-based "Gulf News" 1/15 read:

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"America Must Listen to Its Friends: Bush's blinkered vision is driving a wedge between the US and its Arab Allies"

"America has to learn to listen to its friends in the Middle East, and should stop lecturing them from a prepared script. George W. Bush's historic visit to the region is the first time a sitting US president has come to the UAE, and it has given him a tremendous opportunity to hear from the leaders and the people of the region how to tackle the region's serious issues.

"Bush's top priority was Iran, which he described as 'the world's leading state sponsor of terror.' He said Iran was 'undermining peace in Lebanon and Palestine by aiding terrorist groups like Hezbollah...and Hamas.' And despite the recent National Intelligence Estimate that Iran does not have a nuclear weapons program, Bush said that Iran's refusal to be transparent on its nuclear plans was destabilizing the region.

"Bush's failure to see beyond his own narrow perspective is driving a wedge between America and its Arab allies in the Middle East. Hamas has won elections in Palestine, and is a popular and legitimate political movement, which cannot be ostracized. Hezbollah is an established and important part of the Lebanese political scene, and needs to be included as a full part of the Lebanese political dialogue.

"Iran itself cannot be ignored. It has to be treated as a normal part of the political framework in the gulf, despite areas of disagreement. As Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal said, 'We have relations with Iran and we speak to them. If we sense a threat...we will speak with them.'

"But while Iran may be high on Bush's agenda for the region, the Arab states have other priorities. The United States has to reverse the massive damage it did to Iraq by failing to have any plans for nation-building after the 2003 invasion. The Gulf states have repeated many times that they are willing to support any regional initiative to kick start political development in Iraq, but it has to incorporate all political parties from Iraq and not ignore those who are against the American presence.

The longest standing Arab priority remains the tragedy of the on-going occupation of Palestine. If any peace talks are to be taken seriously, Israel has to immediately stop expanding its illegal colonies, and eventually commit to removing them. This is not happening and that emphasizes the emptiness of the Annapolis process.

Bush is in Saudi Arabia today, where he will spend time with King Abdullah, the author of the Abdullah Plan, which offers complete peace with Israel for complete withdrawal. Bush would do well to listen to his host and adopt the plan.

Finally, throughout his trip Bush has been repeating his support for justice and freedom in the region, which he puts it in the context of democracy and personal liberty. No one can disagree with support for justice and freedom, but the US president cannot insist on it in some places and then fail to support it in Palestine."

16. Abdul Ghaffar Hussain also wrote in "Gulf News":

"Bush's UAE Visit is Significant: as long as the U.S. acknowledges and respects our policies, Bush's visit must be welcomed."

"The visit by U.S. President George W. Bush is a landmark event in the history of the UAE. The country is gaining increasing significance in the world due to its reputation and its political, architectural, economic and social development.

"The UAE is similar to the United States in terms of its multinational and multicultural community, and hence, there is no one in the world who does not look forward to visiting the UAE and acquainting himself/herself with its developments. [...] The U.S. is based on the diversity of its cultures within a framework of the American cultural identity. The UAE also enjoys a high reputation for its solid and inter-faith tolerant community, which accepts anyone who comes to the country with noble personal and social goals, regardless of his cultural, ethnic and religious background.

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[...]

"The UAE always tops the list of most important countries for world leaders and officials who visit the region, and Bush's visit, which is the first visit ever by an American president to the UAE, gains special significance.

"The visit, besides contributing further to the UAE's reputation, gives the country more credit in the international arena. It is very important to welcome Bush because he is the president of the world's greatest country with which the UAE has unique relations and interests.

"Despite political differences between the UAE and the U.S. due to its supportive stand of Israel and the way it handles the Palestinian dossier at the expense of the rights of the Palestinian people, the UAE should invest this visit in favor of Gulf countries, as well as of Palestinian and Arab causes and issues.

"It is wrong to think that the U.S. is not a friend of Arabs, or cannot become a friend; because the U.S. is a state of institutions and democracy, and its people is a diverse mix of various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

"Also, there are eight million Arab and Muslim Americans, who are concerned about the issues of the Arab and Islamic worlds, and millions of non-Arab Americans who give special attention to Arab issues.

"There are also many human rights and charity organizations in the US which provide assistance to suppressed and needy people all over the world with no consideration to their ethnic backgrounds. And this is another point in common between the UAE and the U.S.

[...]

"The UAE people are eager to live in peace with their neighbors and the rest of the world, and have no interest in making enemies or in siding with any aggression or offensive. Thus, we must demand the US to support our sound policy and maintain our moderate principles, and I believe the visit of Bush truly mirrors Washington's acceptance of this wise and moderate policy. As long as the US acknowledges and respects our policies, Bush's visit must be welcomed in an appropriate manner that reflects the significance of the visit and the guest."

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